

# Consciousness, Value, Morality, and Death: Conclusions

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The following, which summarizes my latest conclusions in the problem areas of consciousness, value, morality, and death, is excerpted from my forthcoming book, *The Joy of Life / The Sting of Death* (Grammaticus Press, 2013). Those who wish to pursue the question how I arrived at these conclusions and how I defend them are encouraged to consult the book ...

Your inner life, so called, consists entirely of physical events in your brain. You feel a pang of hunger, for example. That pang is in fact a neural event. You do not know what it is because you do not perceive it in any way, but the fact that you do not know is neither here nor there, of course. It is a neural event for all that you do not catch on. You do know that it is a pang of hunger, however, even though you do not perceive it in any way. That is not surprising, for the neural event occurs right there in your brain and it has the physical configuration of a pang of hunger and not that of some other type of experience, whatever the neurological details might be.

But since your inner life, your consciousness, consists entirely of physical events, it follows that consciousness is a physical phenomenon, period, that it is physical through and through. There is nothing spooky or immaterial about it. It is just as physical as the weather. It evolved on Earth as a biological adaptation.

Since human consciousness consists entirely of physical events, in principle it can be observed in sense perception, and fairly soon, given

advances in technology, it should be possible to observe it fully and accurately.

Consciousness, then, arises on the lowest of the four levels, the physical. It is not a gift handed down from the divine level, it is not a creation of human beings, and, although human consciousness is indeed an upshot of evolution, consciousness in general is not fundamentally a biological phenomenon, for it might in principle be generated by a computer that is not a biological entity. It is not a human phenomenon, in that it is not a human invention and has no special connection with human beings. Human consciousness does distinguish us, of course, in that it is peculiar to us, but that is a trivial point. Armadillo consciousness distinguishes armadillos, and so on.

It is extremely unlikely, moreover, that human consciousness is the most advanced in all of space and time, and it might well not be the most enjoyable form of consciousness even here on Earth today.

But if consciousness consists of neural activity in a brain, or of comparable physical activity in a computer, or somewhere else, if it is a purely physical phenomenon that you can observe with the eyes in your head, then there are no fundamentally subjective phenomena, and hence nothing is left of the subjective domain of reality. The objective world is all there is, for the subjective domain is simply consciousness misunderstood.

The everyday concept of consciousness, moreover, is entirely blank. It is no more than an empty shell of a concept, useless for theoretical purposes. Assuming that your concept is the everyday one, you do not know what a pain in the elbow or a taste of ice cream is. You have absolutely no idea what it is. For you, it is a \_\_\_\_\_ with properties \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_, that and nothing more. Clearly, if you want to understand consciousness, which you must in order

to understand value, morality, death, religion, and many other things, you need a much better concept than that.

In order to understand consciousness, it is necessary to think of it in physical terms. By way of comparison, in order to understand geology, the history of planet Earth, it is necessary to understand it in physical terms, because it is a physical matter. But the same goes for consciousness. It is a physical matter, and so it is necessary to understand it in physical terms in order to understand it at all.

Any experience you have is in fact a neural event in your brain. How can you understand it, then, if you do not even know that it is a neural event? How can you understand it without perceiving it? You cannot, of course. But if you do perceive it, you perceive it as a neural event, for that is what it is.

Your knowledge of your own experience does not go beyond that of the neuroscientist in any way. If you have normal vision, you know what it is like to see something blue. If a totally color-blind neuroscientist observes your experience of seeing blue on the screen of a brain monitor, she does not know what it is like to see blue because she is color-blind, but still, in principle, she knows everything whatever about your experience. The point is that to know everything about the neural event that constitutes your experience of seeing blue is to know everything about your experience, everything without remainder, for there is no more to it than that neural event. Paradoxically, perhaps, to know what it is like to see blue is not to know something about the experience of seeing blue. It is, rather, to register in a direct way, without benefit of perception of any type, whatever that involves in neurological terms, that which appears as the experience of seeing blue, and that is another thing entirely. When it comes to understanding physical phenomena, we humans understand them through sense perception, and only that way.

Consciousness is a perfectly objective phenomenon. It is as it is, and impressions, opinions, and individual responses in general are irrelevant. It is no more subjective than the phenomenon of lightning. Lightning is a physical and hence an objective phenomenon, and so is consciousness. Only one picture of it is true and full, then: the true, full objective picture, which might, however, take various equivalent forms, if you want to get fussy about it.

Whatever anyone can say about consciousness that is true, then, can be said in purely physical terms. That goes for your own consciousness, your own inner life, in particular, of course.

With a few qualifications, however, what goes for consciousness goes for value, morality, and death, too.

The phenomenon of value arose on Earth as a side effect of the pleasure and pain mechanisms of motivation, and it is physical through and through. Pleasure and pain are purely physical in that they are forms of consciousness. Pleasure is of positive value in that it has a certain physical configuration, that is to say, certain physical properties, properties in virtue of which it is perfectly understandable that the organism in which it occurs tends to prolong it and to seek to repeat it. What those properties are remains to be seen—literally seen, on the screen of a brain monitor. Likewise, pain is of negative value in that it has a physical configuration in virtue of which it is perfectly understandable that the organism in which it occurs tends to bring it to an end as soon as possible and to avoid a repetition. Again, it remains to be seen what those properties are.

The point is that value is not some airy-fairy something that floats magically above the physical world, somehow, and is not simply a human way of thinking and acting that we find useful or convenient, or one that the human genome engenders. It is, rather, an aspect of the natural,

physical world, just as much an aspect of it as gravity or electricity.

In our universe, then, there is such a thing as positive and negative value precisely in that there is such a thing as positive and negative consciousness. The former is of positive value and the latter of negative value, and nothing else is of value positive or negative, for nothing else has physical properties in virtue of which it is of value, as far as we know at present. To say that a bar of gold is of value is to speak the truth, but it is, nevertheless, to speak in a very unclear, confused way. The accurate statement is that a bar of gold can be used to manufacture something that brings positive consciousness, or happiness or joy if you wish, or can be traded for something that does so, or so on, not that it is valuable. It is not valuable, however you might feel about it. It is at best merely a means to something that is valuable.

Nothing but positive and negative consciousness, pleasure and pain, then, is of positive or negative value, setting aside the possibility of phenomena of which we are as yet entirely unaware or will forever remain unaware.

It makes good sense to recognize evil, in the sense of extreme pain or unnecessary suffering. An evil person, then, is evil in a secondary sense. His or her behavior produces extreme unnecessary suffering, or his or her attitudes or make-up tend to do so. There is no need to put a spooky interpretation on the concept of evil. Evil is not a matter of evil spirits. It is a thoroughly physical phenomenon. The good, as it were, consists entirely of physical events of a certain very special kind, and the bad, including the evil, or extremely bad, of physical events of a different kind.

Only positive consciousness is of positive value, then, and it is a purely physical natural phenomenon. Only negative consciousness, on the other hand, is of negative value, and it too is a purely physical, natural phenomenon. Hence value is a natural phenomenon through and through, just as

consciousness is.

To observe value is simply to observe positive and negative consciousness, and so, in principle, value can be observed in sense perception. Fairly soon, in view of rapid advances in technology, it should be possible to observe it fully and accurately. This opens up wide vistas and large possibilities. How happy are people under dictatorial and theocratic regimes, which is to say, how well do such regimes succeed in bringing good into the world, as any government ought to? Even today it is possible to answer this question to some extent by the use of expertly formulated questionnaires and so on, but it would be far more revealing to observe the phenomenon straightforwardly.

On the more lighthearted side, how does popular commercial music compare to that of Bach, Debussy, and Stravinsky? Very unfavorably, I am sure, but I would like to be able to prove it beyond a doubt.

Value, then, like consciousness, arises on the lowest of the four levels, the physical. Positive value is not a gift handed down from the divine level and negative value is not a divine curse or punishment, and at bottom value is not a creation of human beings or a biological phenomenon. "All that is of value is a gift from on high." No! That is true only if all of physical nature is a divine creation, and there is no reason to believe that, much as some people insist on it. "You make something valuable by deciding to value it." Nonsense! "Our genes predispose us to value certain things." So what? The truth is that the very physics of the universe creates value. If you want to thank something for all that is good, then thank the universe, this particular universe in which you find yourself! Quite possibly there are innumerable other universes that do not deserve thanks in that they do not produce positive value.

Value, then, is a cosmic phenomenon, not a human one. It is not a human creation, and it has no special connection with humans. It is simply

an objective fact of nature. Human opinions on questions of value are mere opinions. Just as you cannot say, “Space and time do not work this way but rather that way, because humans feel it is so,” you cannot say, “This is not valuable but that is, because humans feel it is so.” Fundamentally, human feelings and judgments about value are neither here nor there, for value, like space and time, gravity, stellar evolution, and so on, is just as it is whatever humans, or aliens for that matter, might feel or think.

The everyday concept of value is blank. To say that something other than an experience is valuable, even if it is true, is to speak in a confused way. But to say that an experience is valuable is to say that it has property \_\_\_\_\_, where that property is a physical property of the experience, which itself is a physical event. The point is, sitting there in your armchair or on your *zabuton* innocent of technical knowledge, you do not have the slightest idea what that property is. In fact, today, nobody knows what it is, because the structure and functioning of the brain are not yet sufficiently well understood. To you, then, that property in virtue of which your experience is valuable is property \_\_\_\_\_. Thus it is that your concept of value is blank, marvelously empty. No wonder value is such a difficult topic!

In order to understand value to the very bottom, it is necessary to think of it in physical terms. Obviously, if something is valuable in that it has property \_\_\_\_\_, then you do not understand value until you can fill in the blank. But the blank stands for a physical property. To fill it in, you must write in a description, a correct one, of that property, the property in virtue of which that something, an experience, is valuable. In other words, you have got to think in physical terms in order to understand value. To be sure, this is very much at odds with the way people tend to think of value, but that is of course irrelevant.

Your knowledge of the value of your own experience does not go beyond that of the neuroscientist in any way. The neuroscientist sees, with the eyes in her head, that your experience has such a physical configuration, such a set of physical properties, that the organism in which it occurs, you, naturally tend to act to prolong it, to repeat it, and so on—such that you value it, as we say. Let us say that the experience is simply the sight of a beautiful shell washed up on the beach. The point is that you know nothing whatever about the value of that experience that is not evident to the neuroscientist who observes the workings of your brain, in that you know nothing about that experience that is not evident to her, provided only that she understands that which meets her eyes.

Given that value is a purely physical phenomenon, two things follow: Whatever anyone can say about value that is true can be said in purely physical terms. And value is a perfectly objective phenomenon. Hence only one picture of it is true and full: the true, full objective picture.

Value, then, is absolute, not relative. This or that tribe might value a magnificent waterfall on its territory, or the steaming blood of captured enemy warriors sacrificed at the temple, or an elaborate style of head-dress, but the fact that they value it does not entail that it is to be valued. A society can be right or wrong in its sense of values, and in the real world, surely, a society is often partly right and partly wrong. Similarly for this or that individual.

It is nature, however, not a supreme creator being, that renders value absolute. What is valuable properly speaking is valuable due to its physical configuration, not to some act of some transcendent being. And what is valuable according to common speech, truly valuable as that word is ordinarily used, is so due to its connections with what is valuable properly speaking. But at bottom this is entirely a physical matter. There is no need to bring in a transcendent being, or a spiritual agent or element



of any sort whatever, to explain it.

There is no value sense or intuition that reliably identifies the good and the bad. Ultimately, it is possible to identify the good and the bad accurately only by using the eyes in your head.

Fundamentally, value is not an adaptive strategy, either for society or for the individual. It is not that a society values something in order to survive or prosper and thereby renders it valuable, and similarly for an individual. And it is not that certain things are valuable because the human race as a whole has learned through millennia of experience to value them, or because the human brain has evolved in such a way as to value them. What is valuable, to wit, consciousness of certain sorts, is so whether anyone values it or not, and whatever the workings of this or that society or of this or that individual human brain, or of the human brain in general terms. Value, again, is not a human phenomenon but a cosmic one.

Due to the process of evolution, people value survival, for example. They want to survive, at least through a full life cycle. They do not want to die. But wherein lies the value of survival? Is it valuable because people are constituted as a result of evolution so as to value it? No, that does not make sense. The fact that people value survival, no matter how ardently, does not make it valuable. Rather, survival is valuable for the joy it brings. That makes sense, though it will not make sense fully and undeniably until the progress of neuroscience makes it possible to understand the phenomenon of value to the bottom in physical terms.

Next for the phenomenon of morality. It is of course closely related to those of consciousness and value.

The physics of the universe gave rise on Earth to pain and pleasure, joy and suffering, and to physical agents, human beings as far as Earth alone is concerned, that participate in determining how much of each occurs. In this way it gave rise to right and wrong, for it is right to create

unproblematical joy and wrong to create unnecessary suffering. The phenomenon of morality, then, the very fact that there is such a thing as right and wrong, is physical through and through.

A human being is a purely physical entity. Given that his or her very consciousness is a purely physical phenomenon, there is no reason to doubt this. The fact of human creativity is no objection. To insist that no computer can ever match or exceed it is to engage in a silly, self-lauding exercise in mysticism.

A human being, however, makes choices that have important consequences. If your job is to inspect passenger airliners for safety, for example, then it is very important that you do it as well as you can. The happiness of many people depends on it. But to do your best is not the only option open to you. You can choose to do your job just barely well enough to avoid getting fired, for example. You can go through the motions and ignore anything that looks wrong until you get fired, or jailed. You can choose to sabotage an airliner deliberately. And so on. But the fact that you have options, even if only one of them is morally acceptable, is enough to show that in doing your job well, poorly, or not at all you make a choice that has important consequences.

There is, of course, the age-old question of freedom of choice. Since you are a physical being through and through, every feeling you experience, every thought you have, and everything you do, without exception, occurs in accordance with the laws of physics, just like the motion of a billiard ball or a galaxy. Nevertheless, your own ethical principles, your own desires, and your own personality figure in that great concatenation of causes that eventuates in your overt behavior. That is the difference between you and a billiard ball. The billiard ball does not have ethical principles, desires, a personality, and so on. But this means that if you do have options on a given occasion—you will do this if so inclined and that

if so inclined in that there is nothing to stop you—you act freely. That is what it means to act freely. You have options and you do what you decide to do, whatever that might be, because your make-up and momentary state are just what they are at the moment you act.

Now suppose that you are not free in that you have no options on a particular occasion. Then there is no chance for rationality to enter the picture. Rationality is the key. If a gang of criminals tapes a knife into your hand and then forces it, still in your hand, into the body of a victim, for the sake of fingerprints and the like, then, though you can reason that this ought not to be happening, your reasoning has no effect on the final outcome. The victim dies anyway. But if you are standing free as usual and just happen to have a knife in your hand, and you get angry at another person for some reason, then you do have an option. You can restrain your impulse to stab, and your reasoning does affect the outcome: you restrain yourself and the other lives to anger you another day. Rationality, however, is relevant in that it tends to the good, for the rational choice is the one that promises the best consequences. As a rational agent with human limitations you tend to do the right thing, unlike a billiard ball or a knife, which in itself does not incline to right or to wrong at all. No sober observer blames the knife for killing the man. The rational act is the one that promises to work out for the best, and so, to the extent that you are free, rational, and well informed, you do the right thing.

It is difficult to state this accurately, without slipping up somewhere, but the basic point stands. In a word, freedom in the sense in question—you have options and you choose the one determined by your nature and your momentary state—is good in that it gives rein to rationality, which works for the good.

An act that is right, moreover, consists entirely of a series of physical events, and similarly for an act that is wrong. You consider what to do.

Your thinking is an entirely physical affair. Your brain does it, and your brain is a physical object. You do what you have decided to do. In other words, your body moves in certain ways, and that too is a physical affair, of course. The outcome is that you or other people or both you and they are happy, or feel better, to put it simply. But that too is a physical affair, in that consciousness is so. Your right act, then, is a physical affair through and through, from beginning to end. There is nothing to it that is not physical. And it is the physical facts of the case and nothing else that make it right: the outcome is positive consciousness and that is good in virtue of its physical configuration, and the act is right in that it has that outcome.

Since morality is a purely physical affair, it is a natural phenomenon *interamente* (*completamente*). In principle, there is nothing to it that cannot be observed in sense perception.

As for meaning, purpose, and human dignity:

Value is basic and meaning derivative. Opportunities for meaning arise naturally. You cannot bestow meaning on something by an act of mumbo-jumbo (“I hereby declare my watch-repair hobby to be meaningful”), and you cannot make it meaningful just by treating it as if it were meaningful, by repairing watches as if it were a meaningful activity, for example. If watch repair holds the promise of meaning for you, in that it will bring you satisfaction and beautiful, functioning watches will appear, for example, then all you can do, and all you have to do, is to take advantage of that fact by launching into it. In general terms, all you can or have to do is to take advantage of the opportunities for meaning that the natural development of things opens in your vicinity.

Similarly, value is basic and purpose derivative. Opportunities to live and work with a good, solid purpose arise naturally. Your purpose is to make things better, and that means, ultimately, to promote the unprob-

lematical happiness of all the sentient beings under your influence, including yourself, and to minimize unnecessary suffering wherever it might occur, in human beings or elsewhere. That is your purpose because it is anyone's and everyone's purpose. You cannot create a purpose for yourself or anyone else by an act of mumbo-jumbo ("I hereby declare my work at the sewage plant to be purposeful"), and you cannot do so simply by going through the motions of purposeful behavior: a furrowed brow, and firm stride, and so on. Rather, if your occupation does in fact offer an opportunity to work with a purpose, to protect the public from cholera or from an aviation disaster, for example, or to raise your children to competence and responsibility, then all you can do is to seize the opportunity. And that is just fine, because, once more, that is all you have to do.

As for human dignity, humans have a strong rational streak, even though they are very imperfectly rational. Hence they tend to opt for positive consciousness, for joy and happiness, both for themselves and for others, for that is the rational thing to do. But that is to say, they tend to opt for the good. And in virtue of that if nothing else, they are beings of dignity. Of a normal human being you can say, if you wish, "The universe works for the good through that person." But that surely confers dignity on him or her.

Morality arises on the lowest of the four levels, then, the physical. It is not a gift or a burden handed down from the divine level, and not a creation of human beings, or a pattern of feeling and behavior traceable to the human genome. The laws of physics gave rise to value positive and negative, in the form of positive and negative consciousness, or to joy and suffering if you wish, and to agents that participate in determining how much of each occurs through their choices, and thereby to morality. There is no need and no reason to suppose that it was a divine agent that did so. That hypothesis is unnecessary and pointless.

Likewise, meaning and purpose arise on the physical level, first and foremost in that value does so. Given value, to achieve meaning and purpose is a matter of seizing opportunities that the physics of the universe creates. Physics, then, commonly felt to be cold, impersonal, and devoid of meaning, gave rise and continues to give rise to all that matters.

Morality is not a human phenomenon, and not a biological one, either, but a cosmic one. Everything that goes to make it up, positive and negative value in the form of joy and suffering, and agents that make choices and thereby participate in determining how much of each occurs, is of cosmic, not human, origin. It is of physical origin. And morality has no special connection with human beings, unless, most improbably, they are the only moral agents that have ever existed and the only ones that ever will. And even in that case, in principle it applies to moral agents of all types, not just to human beings.

Universal morality is the morality of godlike beings who for all practical purposes understand and control all with ease, whether or not there are such beings in fact. My guess, for what it is worth, is that there are. However that may be, sound human morality approximates universal morality. It is what you get when you start with universal morality and then fall away from that ideal just far enough to take into account human quirks and limitations, and no farther. Universal morality is basic, then. The theory I have presented is a theory of universal morality. To criticize it on the grounds that it does not accord with human feelings and tendencies of thought, then, is to miss the point. So what, that it fails to accord with human feelings? That is neither here nor there, just as it is neither here nor there that my grandmother felt that a round Earth just does not make any sense, as she did.

On the level of universal morality, the right act is the one that will in fact yield the best outcome in terms of value. What is value, then? It is an

experience that has property \_\_\_\_\_, a physical property. And what is that property? No one knows as yet. Hence universal morality is largely a blank, empty concept as matters stand today, in that consciousness and value are so. But so is human morality, in that it is a minimal falling-away from universal morality if it is anything respectable at all.

In order to understand morality to the very bottom, it is necessary to think of it in physical terms, because it is in fact a physical phenomenon.

The concepts of consciousness, value, and morality will not remain blank forever. They will cease to be blank when we come to understand consciousness thoroughly in physical terms, the only terms in which it can be understood.

In principle, your knowledge that something you did is right or wrong does not go beyond that of another person who observes the entire affair from his or her point of view. Your act is a series of physical events from start to finish, and that which makes it right or wrong lies entirely in its physical consequences. Hence, in principle, the fact that it is right or wrong lies fully open to observation.

Morality is a perfectly objective phenomenon, and only one picture of it is true and full: the true, full objective picture. This is so in that it is a purely physical matter.

In principle, then, whatever anyone can say about right and wrong that is true can be said in purely physical terms.

Morality is absolute, not relative. It is not relative to the society or the individual in question, or to anything else. It is not that what is right in this society is wrong in that one. Rather, what is right is right, what is wrong is wrong, and what is permissible is permissible, period. That is because right and wrong is a matter of objective fact. In fact, of all the courses of action open to you on a given occasion, one in particular will work out best in terms of value. If you do not know which one, or even

what courses of action are open to you, then tough on you. You have got to do the best you can, of course, and that might very well mean following rough rules of human morality. But when all is said and done, the right act is the one that has the best consequences, whether you can figure out which one that is or not. The same goes for an entire society.

What should Israel do, for example, in view of its security needs on the one hand and the rights, not to mention the sufferings, of the Palestinians on the other? What should the Palestinians do about their situation? What should the world do about the whole mess—for it appears unlikely, as I write this, that the principals will solve the problem between them? Religion and tribalism, the former shocking in its irrationality and the latter almost as shocking, do huge damage and pose huge dangers in this case, as so often. In fact, in their absence there would be no problem in the first place, quite obviously. In the long term, then, the solution is to deal effectively with those two curses, the evil twins religion and tribalism. But as for the immediate and mid-term future, quite possibly no one really knows what to do, however many opinions there might be and however passionately held. It might be best, then, to try this, that, and the other to see what works all around, if feasible. However that might be, the fact that mere human beings do not know is neither here nor there. There is a right thing to do about it whether anyone can figure it out or not.

It is nature, however, not God, that renders morality absolute. It is absolute in the very physical nature of things.

At bottom, morality is not a matter of moral intuition. No such faculty of intuition, no moral sense, reliably distinguishes that which is right from that which is wrong. The best way for us to improve our ability to distinguish right from wrong is to improve our understanding of value and morality.

Consider a fascinating passage on the fascist view of morality, from



*The Penguin History of the Second World War:*

The fascist leader, like the democrat, had his ideological roots in the eighteenth century, but whereas the democrat put his faith in reason and debate the fascist believed in the power and virtue of the will. Traditionally the high road to right action has been knowledge discovered by reason; the function of reason was to uncover the knowable which, when revealed, was common property. Reason and knowledge assumed therefore universal values. The will, however, was personal. Whereas the individual impelled by reason was moving towards agreement with other individuals, the individual impelled by will was at least as likely to be moving towards a clash with other individuals. The will was subjective rather than communal, aggressive rather than irenic [aiming at peace]. The will was seen as a creative force in its own right operating in a world in which the objective reality sought by the reasonable man of the Enlightenment was an illusion. There were no external criteria of rightness, only inner promptings. Therefore the strong-willed had right on his side, and the stronger his will the more right he was ... His destiny was that of a sovereign creator in a world of his own which impinged upon the personal worlds of other sovereign creators; it was not his lot, nor was it within a man's capability, to discover a single world in which all would participate, because such a world did not exist to be discovered. The world was not a semi-known and orderly system but an unknowable and anarchic non-system.

... The Italian fascists summed up the position in the slogan: *Credere! Ubbedere! Combattere!* (Believe! Obey! Fight!). The fascist leader was also a saviour and redeemer, more of a superman than a man, half-way between god and man, what the ancients called a hero.

By dubbing him Duce and Führer — leader in Italian and German — the fascists usurped a term to which they had no exclusive right, for Churchill and de Gaulle were leaders too. What distinguishes the fascist chief is not leadership, but the role of hero. The hero disdains reason (Homer's heroes never engage in rational debate) and prevails by the weight of authority and by killing. His criteria are quantitative — the bigger the better, whether the subject matter is the length of a speech ... or the number of deaths in a slaughter.

(square brackets added)

Well, which is it, then? Do we live in one universe, the common home of all, a single objective domain in which there is such a thing as objective truth, including objective moral truth, that we can discover by rational means, by observation and reasoning? Or do we live in a strange, nightmarish chaos, each of us in his or her own subjective domain, which nevertheless impinges on neighboring ones, in which there is no objective truth but only pure will, only “I am determined, and I will crush all who stand in my way”? The point is simple and basic: you have got to get your facts straight if you want to understand morality. Where do we live, really, and what is going on there?

The quotation speaks in the conventional way of “faith in reason” as “the high road to right action.” At bottom, however, it is not reason that reveals the road to right action, but rather observation supported by reasoning. In principle, this reveals what is of value and what leads to what, and there is no need to place faith in this, that, or the other. It is simply a matter of observing and understanding, basically as a scientist observes and understands, and faith has nothing to do with it.

The quotation presents the fascist position as a loose cluster of ideas, many of them highly vague: subjectivity is paramount; there are no facts

of morals; the world is unknowable at bottom; the will is basic, not the truth; the ego creates right by an act of will, or in other words, I do so, if I am strong enough; conflict is inevitable; an individual hero / savior is to be sought out. This stands in stark contrast to the position I urge: objectivity is paramount, to say the least, in that there is no such thing as subjectivity, trivial qualifications aside; there are firm, objective facts of value and morals; the world is knowable, and is yet more fully knowable to a level of intelligence higher than natural human intelligence, one that might well be achieved in the future, quite possibly in the mid-term future; the objective truth is basic, not the will, not preference, not inclination, and not anything else of the sort; no individual divine or human creates right, for good and evil, right and wrong are facts of nature, cosmic phenomena not centered on any particular individual or even on any particular species; conflict is at best an unfortunate necessity in isolated cases and cooperation as opposed to conflict the ideal; there is no individual hero / savior and none is to be sought, for it is the responsibility of every adult individual to contribute what he or she can to salvation, or, more prosaically, to any problem-solving that might be necessary.

We know where the fascist muddle led: to horrors beyond the imagination of anyone who did not experience them personally. But that ought to cast doubt on every aspect of the fascist position, including the individual hero / savior as opposed to universal responsibility for salvation from misery. Which is the more noble vision, that of capable adults each of whom does what he or she can in cooperation with others to make things better, or that of a shapeless, helpless mass yearning to be led by the nose by a hero / savior, whether that be Jesus ("Jesus is King!") or Mussolini ("Duce, Duce!")?

"The former vision gets my vote."

Mine too. In order to understand value and morality to the bottom,

however, in addition to efforts in history, philosophy, and the like, it is necessary to understand the structure and functioning of the brain, for that is where value lies, in consciousness.

Each society develops its own morality through long experience, partly in order to serve perfectly sensible purposes, internal harmony, defense against external threats, prosperity, and so on, or adopts the morality of another society. In addition, as Richard Dawkins argues, the human brain has evolved to show certain characteristics, and that accounts—though it does so only to a limited extent, in fact—for our moral preferences. But none of this is basic. It does not explain how it is that there is such a thing as morality. Rather, there is such a thing as morality in that positive and negative consciousness have appeared in the course of organic evolution as mechanisms of motivation, and in addition, semi-rational and perhaps fully rational agents capable of making decisions and influencing the course of events have appeared too, in a universe in which those agents often find themselves free to do this or that as they choose. At bottom, then, morality is not a strategy of any sort, not an adaptation of any sort, and not a product of the human genome. Rather, it is a fact of nature, and, once more, a cosmic not a human phenomenon.

In order to be moral, it is necessary to be rational. Fundamentally, this is because morality is an objective matter of fact. What is right is right and what is wrong, wrong, whatever you or anyone else might happen to feel or think. But how do you determine an objective matter of fact? Mysticism has nothing to do with it, to be sure. It is a matter of observation and rational thought.

A failure to understand, a superficial failure or a fundamental one, often leads to ineffective, wrong, or heinous behavior. Consider the history of people of sub-Saharan African decent in the United States, for centuries considered erroneously to be inferior beings—and note that

American religion, supported by the Bible, perpetuated the error.

We do not understand the ultimate nature of physical reality or its overall structure, but there is right and wrong, most likely, no matter what the answer to that conundrum proves to be, if indeed we or our successors ever figure it out.

And finally for death. Pretty much the same things hold here as for consciousness, value, and morality.

The physics of the universe gave rise on Earth to organisms which, whatever the reason, do not continue to function forever, including human beings. Death is a biological phenomenon and hence a physical one, or in an extended sense, to cover conscious robots and the like, simply a physical phenomenon. The point is, it is a physical affair, not a metaphysical one. This is important. Your death consists entirely of physical events in your body. The notion that life, life in general, consists of something over and above the physical was discarded many decades ago, quite correctly. But consciousness itself is a physical phenomenon that one can in principle understand in full from the third-person perspective, objectively, and this leaves no serious doubt but that the death of a human being is a purely physical affair.

Death, then, is a natural phenomenon—natural, not supernatural, and physical, not metaphysical.

In principle there is nothing to your death or any other death that cannot be observed in sense perception. Your inner life or consciousness can be observed, and so of course can the last flickering of it, in principle.

Death arises on the lowest of the four levels, then, the physical. It is not a punishment handed down from the divine level, and of course it is not a creation of human beings and is not peculiar to them. In the usual narrow sense of the expression “death,” it is indeed a biological phenomenon, but that is no objection to the conclusion that it arises on the physical

level. As for an awareness of one's own coming death and fear of it, perhaps, on Earth, it is peculiar to human beings, though even that is questionable, but in the universe as a whole it probably is not.

In order to understand death, then, it is necessary to think of it in physical terms.

Death is an objective phenomenon, as indeed it must be, since there is no such thing as a subjective phenomenon, a phenomenon fundamentally subjective in character. Only one picture of it is true and full, then: the true, full objective picture. The same goes for your own death in particular, of course. The only true picture of it is the true objective picture.

But this is of profound significance for the question of the meaning of death. What is the true, objective picture of your death? A human being ceases to function, and in particular ceases to generate consciousness, which is to say, an organism of a certain type does so. That is all there is to it. Not "I die," and not even "I cease to function," but simply "A human being ceases to function." Your death, then, means no more for you than the death of a stranger on the other side of the planet. Objectively it means no more than the death of a stranger, and hence, objectively, for you it means no more than that. It means no more than that, period. If you think it means more than that for you, then you are just plain mistaken.

Whatever anyone can say about death that is true can be said in physical terms, and this too goes for your own death in particular.

In the reality that lies behind our ways of speaking, there is no such thing as having, enjoying, or suffering an experience. You generate the experiences you are said to have. You do not have or experience them. Hence there is no such thing as an entity that has experiences, a subject of experience. There is no such thing as an immaterial subject of experience, a soul, and no such thing as a physical subject of experience, an organism or a computer that has experiences.

You do not have and hold the joy of life, then. Rather, you generate a certain measure of it. But you cannot lose what you do not have in the first place. As far as the joy of life goes, then, you suffer no loss whatever in dying. The value of the joy of life lies in its very occurrence, not in having it. There is no such thing as having it. And as for agency, doing things and getting things done, you yourself suffer no loss whatever in dying, basically in that quite in general you suffer no loss in dying as far as the joy of life goes, and the universe suffers no loss either, in that others can do what you did not get to do, or something better. The question of the human life span ought to be treated as a purely practical matter, then.

All value lies in consciousness, but it does not lie in my consciousness for me and in your consciousness for you.

It is not that you alone enjoy the consciousness that occurs in your brain. Rather, you alone know of it in a special, direct way. It stands to reason, though it is not yet possible to run the experiment, that if the cognitive areas of your brain were connected to the joy of nine other people as well as to your own, that is, to the joy generated by the brains of nine others, you would value your own joy, to follow the common way of speaking, no more than that of those nine others. As it is, the joy of your own life is special to you not in that you alone enjoy it, but rather in that you alone know of it directly. It is not a matter of enjoying or benefiting from it, but simply a matter of knowing of it in a particularly impressive way.

In reality there is no such thing as your death, for reality is objective not subjective, and in objective reality there is no such thing as your death. There is only the death of this, that, or the other human organism. The reality is not “I will die,” but rather “\_\_\_\_\_ will die” (insert your name), and that is an entirely different matter, because it carries with it an objective view of the situation, and that is very different from the usual

horrific or ludicrous subjective fantasy.

On the other hand, if the soul is real, then death is very problematical indeed. In that case, who knows what happens after the demise of the body? It might be anything. It might be something far worse than anything anyone has ever imagined. Be glad that there is no such thing as the spooky soul, and that death is a physical not a metaphysical phenomenon!

There is no salvation from death in religion. First and foremost, death presents no occasion for salvation, since the person who dies loses nothing at death. Salvation from death is like salvation from volleyball, salvation from red cabbage, salvation from tic-tac-toe (noughts and crosses), or salvation from cardboard. There is absolutely no call for it. Beyond that, the promise of eternal life in immaterial form in an immaterial, supernatural paradise up there, or wherever, is little better than a scam, and in some cases it amounts to a scam pure and simple. It will not happen. Life is a physical phenomenon. Consciousness is a physical phenomenon. Value is a physical phenomenon. How, then, can there be life and splendid consciousness in immaterial form? It does not make a bit of sense, and that is a serious matter, not to be brushed off.

There is no salvation in technology, either, or in Frank Tipler's hope of resurrection thanks to the benevolence of highly advanced future beings. Again, death presents no occasion for salvation. To suppose that it does is confusion.

As for the process of dying as opposed to the state of death, it can be painful and that represents a problem that calls for attention, just like any other problem. And as for the animal fear of death, be glad that you feel it. It is no problem at all. It keeps you alive, and life is good, in that consciousness is good, overall. But if you feel a morbid fear of death, relief lies in a clear understanding of the facts insofar as that is attainable, and perhaps in psychological therapy, though it is hard to imagine why ther-



any is necessary if you understand the facts. There is no cause whatever for gloom, for there is no doom. Let the prospect of your own death be a spur to creativity, or at the least to honest, productive work!

Consciousness, value, morality, and death, then, are natural phenomena. There is nothing supernatural about them. This point is especially striking with respect to death, for most people around the world today, probably, take death to have a supernatural aspect. It does not, or if that is too strong for you, there is no reason to suppose that it does and no point in doing so.

All four phenomena, moreover, are physical. There is nothing immaterial or spooky to any of them. A person who values a library of fine poetry more than a new sports car, who would choose the former over the latter, is said to be spiritual. In this sense, of course, the spiritual is a very important aspect of life. But everything spiritual in this sense is purely physical. The poetry lover's personality, including his spirituality, is due to his brain, which is physical. His pleasure in poetry is physical. And his books, paper or otherwise, are physical. His spirituality is entirely a physical affair. The fact that consciousness, value, morality, and death are purely physical phenomena does not rule out the spiritual. On the contrary, it makes it possible. It is the spooky, not the spiritual, that is eliminated.

All four phenomena, moreover, are cosmic as opposed to human. There is no special connection between human beings and consciousness. Humans generate consciousness, but so do other beings, crocodiles and so on, and more likely than not there are beings, biological and otherwise, that generate consciousness far higher and more refined than ours. There might be trillions of types of beings, or infinitely many, that generate consciousness. Likewise, there is no special connection between humans and value. Humans generate consciousness that is of value, but so do other

beings. When it comes to value, our role is simply to understand and maximize it. Again, there is no special connection between humans and morality. We know of no other type of being that is subject to morality, but most likely that is because we have not yet been able to see what is out there at a distance in detail. We are like people stuck in one small room of a sprawling palace, struggling to get a view of the rest. With respect to morality, our role is not to bring it into being, for it came into being as soon as we did if not earlier, but rather to understand it thoroughly and to maximize value within the limits of our powers. Nor is death a human phenomenon.

In fact it is not death, but rather the cessation of consciousness that is in question here. The death of a mushroom is not to the point. On the other hand, the onset of a profound coma from which the victim never recovers is to the point, no matter how long he or she survives in a vegetative state. “Death” is not even the right word, then. The question is, what does the final cessation of consciousness in a certain entity—the one I call “you” and you call “I,” for example—mean for that entity, in fact?

These four phenomena are not divine or human, then, or biological at bottom, but rather cosmic, and hence humanism gets them wrong, too, not just religion. It is not for human beings to stipulate nor does their genetic make-up determine what is good and what evil, what is right and what wrong. As for death, some humanists concede that it is terrible and lamentable, but urge that we ought to face it bravely like adults and not escape into fairy tales of eternal life up in the sky. But that is not so, for, although we ought indeed to face things bravely like adults, the death of the individual is not terrible or lamentable for that individual, although the end of all that is of value everywhere, cosmic lights out, CLO, is perhaps terrible, if it does indeed lie in the future.

The fact that consciousness, value, morality, and death are natural,

physical phenomena means that it should be possible for us to understand them thoroughly, to the bottom. That is promising. The importance of knowledge and understanding, especially in matters of value and morality, cannot be exaggerated.

Understand, and you will do right. Understand, and you will not fear. Understand, then, as well as you can!

#### REFERENCE / DISCLAIMER

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Peter Calvocoressi, Guy Wint, and John Pritchard, *The Penguin History of the Second World War*; Penguin Books. Copyright © Peter Calvocoressi 1972, 1979; Krishna Wint 1972; John Pritchard 1989.

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